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Dealing with a Taliban- Controlled Afghanistan

Supporting the Afghan People without Legitimizing the Regime

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About the Author



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Executive Summary

Nearly 20 years after U.S. forces overturned Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the fundamentalist Islamist movement is back in power. This follows the U.S. troop withdrawal in summer 2021 and a failed peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban that was concluded during the Trump administration. The U.S. government must continue to monitor terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan and work with like-minded nations to protect Afghan civil society, especially women and girls. While competing with China may be America's number one foreign policy priority, managing terrorism threats and protecting women's rights in Afghanistan also demands continued U.S. attention and resources.

First and foremost, the United States and other international donors must help Afghanistan avoid a humanitarian disaster and ensure average Afghans can meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and access to healthcare. While the United Nations and international humanitarian organizations are finding ways to get cash into the system without funneling it through the Taliban, there is a need to identify a more reliable and sustainable solution to Afghanistan's liquidity crisis. However, releasing to the Taliban without conditions the nearly \$7 billion in Afghan foreign reserves that Washington froze following the Taliban takeover of the country is not the answer. The Biden administration must avoid giving these assets to the Taliban interim government, which comprises mostly individuals who have been sanctioned for their involvement in terrorism.

The elevation within the Taliban regime of members of the Haqqani Network—a State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization with links to al Qaeda—demonstrates that hardliners are in the ascendance, and that the Taliban is unlikely to break ties to terrorists anytime soon. The Taliban regime has also failed to live up to its initial pledges to protect women's rights. Instead, there are numerous reports of women facing restrictions on their rights, including freedom of movement and access to education and employment. In mid-October, women's rights activist Frozan Safi was shot dead along with three of her colleagues in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Human rights monitors view their murders as an act of Taliban revenge for their leadership of protest demonstrations advocating for the preservation of women's rights.

Since August, the United States has relocated 73,000 Afghans to the United States as they pursue permanent resettlement. However, tens of thousands more Afghans

are trapped in the country, and their lives are in danger because of either their support for human rights and democracy or their role in the 20-year U.S. mission. There is clear bipartisan congressional support for continuing to evacuate Afghans at risk who are eligible to apply for resettlement in the United States.

The United States still has significant national security interests in Afghanistan, and it would be a mistake for Washington to disengage from the country. The U.S. government can demonstrate continued global leadership and redeem its tarnished reputation for the disastrous withdrawal by working with like-minded partners to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and preserve civil society gains. Finally, the United States has a moral obligation to evacuate and resettle Afghans who support human rights and democracy and who worked with the U.S. government and are now in danger because of that work.

Moving forward, the United States should carry out the following steps in the areas of:

Humanitarian Relief

- *Work with international partners to establish a humanitarian and financial assistance corridor.* This could involve the World Bank setting up an Afghan Relief Trust Fund to funnel money into the economy, including for civil servant salaries. The trust fund could operate along the same lines of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which operated from 2002 until the collapse of Kabul on August 15, 2021.

Security

- *Refuse to recognize the Taliban government as long as U.S.- and U.N.-designated terrorists remain part of the cabinet.* Recognizing a government that includes terrorists with U.S. blood on their hands would provide a boost to extremists throughout the region and increase danger to U.S. citizens worldwide.
- *Maintain State and Treasury Department sanctions on Haqqani Network and Taliban leaders until they completely sever ties to terrorism.* The United States should not accede to Taliban demands to lift sanctions on individuals merely because they now hold positions of power. Until these groups completely sever ties to terrorism, the Taliban and the Haqqani Network should retain their classifications as Specially Designated Global Terrorist groups under Executive Order 13224, and the Haqqani Network should remain a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

- *Invest in enhancing drone technology for over-the-horizon counterterrorism (CT) operations.* The United States should be prepared to conduct drone operations from bases in the Middle East for the foreseeable future, since Pakistan and the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan are wary of allowing the United States to conduct lethal operations from their territory.
- *Increase CT cooperation with Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.* There is potential to stage limited CT operations out of Central Asian countries and to increase intelligence sharing to monitor terrorist threats in Afghanistan.

Diplomacy and Human Rights

- *Form a contact group with like-minded countries to determine an engagement strategy with the Taliban and put forward a roadmap for influencing Taliban policies on human rights and terrorism.* The roadmap for engagement should require concrete actions, not just verbal commitments, to generate reciprocal rewards from the United States and its partners, for example technical assistance and other forms of nonhumanitarian aid.
- *Establish that future U.S. development funding will be conditional on respect for human rights, especially those of women.* The U.S. government must make any funding for education programs conditional on women being allowed to teach, girls being allowed to attend secondary school, and women being allowed to attend university classes, including those attended or taught by males.
- *Strengthen the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan mandate to work directly with civil society.* The United States should encourage the U.N. to partner closely with Afghan civil society and non-Taliban political actors to keep civic and political space open.
- *Set up a credible, independent human rights monitoring mechanism.* Establishing a credible and objective human rights monitoring mechanism is necessary to avoid the types of serious abuses that were committed during previous Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001.
- *Maintain a strong position on human rights and terrorism in the U.N. Security Council.* Washington must work closely with London and Paris to prevent Moscow and Beijing from diluting language on human rights in UNSC resolutions related to Afghanistan, or from seeking to prematurely lift UNSC sanctions on Taliban leaders connected to terrorism.
- *Engage closely with the Afghan diaspora.* The U.S. government should remain closely engaged with the Afghan diaspora to monitor the humanitarian and human rights situation inside Afghanistan.

Evacuations

- *Strengthen the State Department's capabilities and hold it accountable for maintaining an effort to evacuate at-risk Afghans eligible to apply for resettlement in the United States.* The State Department must assist these individuals in departing Afghanistan and reaching temporary third-country locations, while providing them humanitarian support as the U.S. government processes their resettlement applications using all available authorities and resources to expedite and streamline the current processes.
- *Work more closely with private entities seeking to safely extract Afghans in danger.* The State Department should establish a more inclusive, better resourced, and more transparent process for working with private organizations to assist Afghan evacuation efforts.

Finally, the U.S. Congress should:

- *Fully empower the Afghanistan Commission mandated in the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and ensure it is handled in a nonpartisan manner.* While the Biden administration mismanaged the U.S. withdrawal, the overall failure of the mission in Afghanistan is a result of mistakes made by both Republican and Democratic administrations. The American public, especially veterans and families who have lost loved ones in the war, were disturbed by the way the evacuation process was handled and want explanations for why and how the Biden administration made its decisions. However, the commission must examine all aspects of the Afghan mission during the past 20 years—not only the past six months. Another important issue for the commission to explore is why the Trump administration forced President Ashraf Ghani to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, even though it was clear the Taliban was not interested in a negotiated settlement. If congressional leaders try to use the Afghanistan issue only to batter their political opponents, all Americans will lose, because national leaders will not learn from past mistakes, but will make similar foreign policy blunders in the future.

Introduction

Nearly 20 years after U.S. forces overturned Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the fundamentalist Islamist movement is back in power. A rapid U.S. troop withdrawal from April through August 2021 followed a failed peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban that was concluded during the Trump administration in February 2020.

President Joe Biden argued that the United States needed to withdraw troops from Afghanistan so that it could focus more resources and attention on the Indo-Pacific and competition with China. Still, the U.S. government must continue to monitor terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan and work with like-minded nations to protect Afghan civil society, especially women and girls. While competing with China may be the number one U.S. foreign policy priority, managing terrorism threats and protecting women's rights in Afghanistan also demands continued attention and resources. This report highlights recommendations to protect both the hard-fought gains of Afghan civil society during the past 20 years and vital U.S. national security interests, especially regarding terrorism threats.

The American public deserves a full reckoning and detailed evaluation of how the United States failed to prevent the Taliban from retaking power after expending so much blood and treasure in Afghanistan. This report

does not attempt to provide such a reckoning, but instead examines how the United States should deal with the country moving forward. It details events that have occurred since the Taliban seized Kabul on August 15, 2021, including the country's lurch toward humanitarian catastrophe and the Taliban's failure to protect the rights of women and girls. It further discusses how the makeup of the Taliban interim government and regional political dynamics are likely to exacerbate terrorism challenges. The report provides recommendations for how the United States should improve continued evacuation and resettlement efforts, engage effectively with the Taliban, assist the Afghan people, and protect U.S. counterterrorism interests.

Averting a Humanitarian Catastrophe

The international community must help Afghanistan avoid a humanitarian disaster and assist average Afghans in meeting their basic needs for food, shelter, and access to healthcare. A U.N. official indicated in mid-November 2021 that 23 million Afghans were in desperate need of food, and that 97 percent of the 38 million population was at risk of sinking into poverty.¹ The economic shock of losing international assistance that had supported 75 percent of the Afghan budget—together with several years of drought and other economic problems—threatens total economic collapse that will send millions into starvation, especially during winter.

As of mid-January 2022, the United States had committed \$782 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and Afghan refugees—more than any other nation.² The United Kingdom has provided around \$386 million for humanitarian aid, while the European Union pledged a support package to Afghanistan and its neighbors worth \$1.1 billion.

Over the last few months, the U.S. Treasury Department has taken steps to allow humanitarian



The sudden halt of international assistance following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021 has left millions of Afghans food insecure. (Wakil Kohsar/Getty Images)

assistance to flow more freely to Afghanistan. The Treasury Department issued licenses for the U.S. government and its contractors to provide aid to Afghans, including food and medicine, and to allow certain entities to interact with the Taliban and Haqqani Network as long as the transactions are necessary for humanitarian assistance and the activities meet basic needs of the Afghan people.³ While U.S. sanctions still prohibit most financial transactions involving the Taliban or Haqqani Network, the new licenses allow payments for associated fees, taxes, import duties, permits, and public utility services.⁴ In early September, after having suspended services immediately following the fall of Kabul on August 15, the United States provided sufficient comfort to Western Union and MoneyGram for those companies to resume facilitation of remittances to the country.⁵

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As compared with the substantial development and technical assistance provided to Afghanistan before August 15, however, the current limited humanitarian assistance is not enough to keep the banking system and economy from collapsing. The U.S. licenses do not apply to funding salaries of health care and education workers, for example. The International Monetary Fund has warned that the economy will contract around 30 percent this year.⁶ Even before the Taliban took power, the economy suffered from slow growth, corruption, endemic poverty, and a severe drought. The sudden collapse since August of international assistance and regular injections of U.S. dollar bank notes has made it all but impossible for traders who relied on U.S. currency to import goods.

To cope with the financial crunch, the United Nations Development Program launched a trust fund in October to infuse cash into the economy through small-scale business grants and cash-for-work projects. The UNDP

says it needs about \$667 million from donors during the next 12 months to help stabilize the economy. In early December, donors provided \$280 million to the United Nations International Children’s Education Fund and the World Food Program to deliver assistance to millions of Afghans.⁷

While these efforts demonstrate that the U.N. and established humanitarian organizations are finding ways to pump limited amounts of cash into the system, there is a need to identify a more reliable and sustainable solution at scale. One way to pay civil servant salaries is to encourage the World Bank to establish a humanitarian relief trust fund along the lines of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) that was suspended following the Taliban takeover. The ARTF is a multidonor fund that coordinates international aid. It has been the largest source of funding for Afghan development since its inception in 2002, financing 30 percent of the Afghan civilian budget.⁸ The advantage of reviving the ARTF—perhaps under a new name such as the Afghanistan Relief Trust Fund—is that the mechanisms and processes for distributing and monitoring the funding are already in place.

Another solution has been proposed by former Treasury Department official and CNAS Adjunct Senior Fellow Alex Zerden: A humanitarian financial corridor could be established by allowing an Afghan private bank, for example the Afghanistan International Bank, to assume some limited functions of the central bank. These could include holding U.S. dollar auctions to inject greater liquidity into the broader Afghan economy for importing goods and conducting other large-scale transactions, such as real estate purchases.⁹ This mechanism could also eventually allow donors to help pay public sector salaries.¹⁰ The challenge with this option, however, is that an Afghan-owned entity would likely be subject to Taliban coercion, making it difficult to avoid some of the money going into Taliban hands.

The Taliban issued a letter to the U.S. Congress, requesting that the United States unblock the reported \$7 billion in Afghan foreign reserves that it froze following the Taliban takeover, or risk facing a mass refugee exodus from the country. In the letter, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi states that withholding the assets has disrupted trade and business and delivery of humanitarian aid to the people.¹¹ In response, the newly appointed U.S. Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West said in a November 19, 2021, tweet that the country had faced economic crisis before the assets were frozen, and that Washington had been clear that nonhumanitarian aid would be stopped if the Taliban took power by force, rather than negotiating a peaceful settlement.¹²

Releasing without conditions to the Taliban the nearly \$7 billion in foreign reserves held in the United States is not the solution to the country’s humanitarian crisis. Allowing the Taliban government—made up mostly of individuals sanctioned by either the U.S. government or the U.N. for involvement in terrorism (details on which follow)—unconditional access to the assets would undermine U.S. national security and could increase the risk of terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens. Given the Taliban leadership’s lack of technical expertise and disregard for respecting international norms, there is no guarantee that releasing the assets would alleviate the immediate humanitarian crisis, and there is little to no chance that unfreezing the funds would provide economic stability over the longer term.

Despite Russia’s and China’s close ties to the Taliban, neither country has indicated a willingness to provide

substantial budget support for the Taliban interim government. A recent meeting in Moscow of several regional states failed to result in any major assistance commitments. Instead, the countries issued a communiqué calling for a U.N.-hosted international donors conference and for “troop-based actors who were in the country for the past 20 years” (i.e., the United States) to shoulder the majority of the financial burden.¹³

Releasing without conditions to the Taliban the nearly \$7 billion in foreign reserves held in the United States is not the solution to the country’s humanitarian crisis.



Despite initial Taliban pledges to respect women’s rights, girls are not allowed to attend secondary school in most provinces, which has brought some out into the streets to protest. (Andolu Agency/Getty Images)

Women's Rights: Where Is Taliban 2.0?

Initial indications that the Taliban might improve its record on respect for women's rights have not materialized. Shortly after the fundamentalist insurgent group took power in August, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid pledged in a press conference that the group would respect the rights of women, according to Shariah law.¹⁴ Four months after taking power, however, the Taliban has failed to clarify whether girls can attend secondary school throughout the country, or whether women will have equal rights to university education or employment. Ten days after taking power, the Taliban told women to stay home until the organization's rank and file had been instructed how to treat women properly.¹⁵ Girls are being prevented from attending secondary school in most provinces, and women are not being allowed to work, except in certain provinces and mostly in the healthcare sector.¹⁶ A few weeks after the Taliban took over the city of Herat, Human Rights Watch reported that women were being forced to stay in their homes, adhere to compulsory dress codes, and submit to curbed access to employment and education.¹⁷

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet underscored in September that the Taliban had contradicted initial public statements, and that women had been progressively excluded from public life.¹⁸ Most chillingly, in early November, well-known Afghan women's rights activist Frozan Safi was abducted and murdered in Mazar-e-Sharif, together with three other young women who had organized and participated in local protests against Taliban rule. Human rights monitors believe these killings were Taliban revenge against their efforts to advocate for the preservation of women's rights, and a warning to others who might do the same.¹⁹

Some observers have noted that the Taliban stepped back from initial pledges to respect women's rights in order to maintain cohesion among their foot soldiers. Otherwise, the rank and file would question their leadership and ask why they fought for 20 years.²⁰ The Taliban has sacrificed human rights to preserve unity among its ranks, argues Andrew Watkins, a senior expert on Afghanistan at the United States Institute of Peace. In Watkins' recent CTC Sentinel article, he notes that "the movement's focused determination to prevent its ranks from splintering has guided decision-making at each turn, even at the risk of alienating a hungry populace or failing to secure funding sufficient to sustain a modern state."²¹

Several reports indicate that the Taliban has failed to honor its initial pledges of amnesty for former government

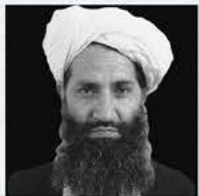
officials. The BBC reported in late August that the group had executed two senior police officials while they were kneeling and blindfolded, with hands tied behind their backs.²² The Taliban's recent actions should not be surprising, given that just two weeks before they swept back into power, they assassinated the former Afghan government state media chief as part of a systematic campaign to eliminate government officials, civil society leaders, human rights activists, and journalists.²³

Empowered Hardliners

The United States seems to have relied more on wishful thinking than facts on the ground in how it handled negotiations with the Taliban during the past three years. The former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad made repeated concessions to the Taliban, rather than establishing a meaningful peace process. This was evident in the announcement and execution of troop withdrawals by both the Trump and Biden administrations, despite the failure of the Taliban to take actions demonstrating good faith toward a negotiated settlement, such as reductions in violence. As a result, the Doha deal undermined the negotiating position of the Afghan government and the morale of the Afghan security forces. Both factors contributed to the rapid collapse of the national security forces during the summer of 2021, and to the Taliban's seizure of Kabul on August 15, 2021.

This weak negotiating style has made the U.S. job more difficult now, because Taliban hardliners are empowered. In particular, the prominent role in the Taliban's power structure of the Haqqani Network—linked closely to both al Qaeda and Pakistan's military and intelligence services—is deeply problematic. The elevation of hardcore leaders within the group's decision-making is clearly seen in the makeup of the interim government. Twenty of the 33 senior-most officials are on the U.N. sanctions list.²⁴ The head of the current interim government, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, served as foreign minister and then deputy prime minister when the Taliban was in power in the late 1990s. Following the organization's ouster from power in 2001, Akhund directed the Taliban's military operations in Afghanistan from his refuge inside Pakistan.²⁵ Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, was appointed interior minister. The FBI has issued a Rewards for Justice program that offers \$5 million for information leading to Sirajuddin Haqqani's arrest due to his role in terrorist attacks targeting U.S. citizens.²⁶

TALIBAN INTERIM CABINET²⁷



SUPREME LEADER

Haibatullah Akhundzada

PROVINCE Kandahar

ETHNICITY Pashtun

Appointed supreme leader on September 7, 2021. Previously appointed Taliban emir on May 25, 2016, following the killing of his predecessor, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan.



PRIME MINISTER

Mohammad Hassan Akhund

PROVINCE Kandahar

ETHNICITY Pashtun



FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Abdul Ghani Baradar

PROVINCE Uruzgan

ETHNICITY Pashtun



SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Abdul Salam Hanafi

PROVINCE Faryab

ETHNICITY Uzbek



MINISTER OF DEFENSE

Mohammad Yaqub

PROVINCE Kandahar

ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF INTERIOR

Sirajuddin Haqqani

PROVINCE Khost

ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Amir Khan Motaqi

PROVINCE Paktia

ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF JUSTICE

Abdul Hakim Haqqani

PROVINCE Kandahar

ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF INFORMATION & CULTURE

Khairullah Khairkhwa

PROVINCE Kandahar

ETHNICITY Pashtun



ARMY CHIEF

Qari Fasihuddin

PROVINCE Badakhshan

ETHNICITY Tajik



MINISTER OF FINANCE

Hedayatullah Badri

PROVINCE Helmand

ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF EDUCATION
Noorullah Munir
PROVINCE Paktia ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF ECONOMY
Qari Din Mohammad Hanif
PROVINCE Badakhshan ETHNICITY Tajik



MINISTER OF HAJJ & AWQAF
Noor Mohammad Saqib
PROVINCE Kabul ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF BORDERS AND TRIBAL AFFAIRS
Noorullah Noori
PROVINCE Zabul ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF RURAL REHABILITATION & DEVELOPMENT
Mohammad Younus Akhundzada
PROVINCE Kandahar ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER FOR PROPAGATION OF VIRTUE & PREVENTION OF VICE
Mohammad Khalid
PROVINCE Nuristan ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS
Abdul Manan Omari
PROVINCE Uruzgan ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF MINES & PETROLEUM
Mohammad Esa Akhund
PROVINCE Kandahar ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF WATER & ENERGY
Abdul Latif Mansoor
PROVINCE Paktia ETHNICITY Pashtun

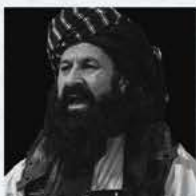
MINISTER OF CIVIL AVIATION & TRANSPORTATION
Hamidullah Akhundzada
PROVINCE Helmand ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Abdul Baqi Haqqani
PROVINCE Nangarhar ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS
Najibullah Haqqani
PROVINCE Kunar ETHNICITY Pashtun



MINISTER OF MIGRATION & REFUGEES
Khalil ur-Rahman Haqqani
PROVINCE Paktia ETHNICITY Pashtun



DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE
Abdul Haq Wasiq
PROVINCE Ghazni ETHNICITY Pashtun

²⁷Three other Haqqani Network leaders have been given ministerial posts. Khalil ur-Rahman Haqqani, who also is the subject of an FBI Rewards for Justice program and was initially appointed to lead security operations in Kabul shortly after the Taliban assumed power, is now minister for refugees. This is particularly concerning given the fear that foreign terrorist fighters will now flock to Afghanistan, since fellow Islamic radicals are in power there. Najibullah Haqqani is communications minister, and Abdul Baqi Haqqani is minister of higher education, which is a bad sign for the future of educational opportunities for women and girls.

The Haqqani involvement in terrorism and close links to al Qaeda are well documented. In a 2021 report, the U.N. indicated that the network “remains a hub for outreach and cooperation with regional foreign terrorist groups and is the primary liaison between the Taliban and al Qaeda.”²⁸ Minister for Refugees Khalil Haqqani has directly supported al Qaeda terrorist operations.²⁹ In 2011, the Haqqani Network carried out attacks at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul that left a dozen civilians dead, and against a U.S. military base that wounded 77 U.S. soldiers. That same year, Sirajuddin Haqqani published a manifesto advocating for global jihad and urging Muslims to travel to the West to conduct terrorist attacks, while praising al Qaeda.³⁰ In May 2017, the Haqqanis allegedly orchestrated a major suicide bombing at a busy intersection in downtown Kabul near the German embassy, killing more than 150 civilians. In an indication that he remains committed to a deadly terrorist agenda, Sirajuddin Haqqani in October praised suicide bombers during a ceremony at the Intercontinental Hotel and provided cash and land plots to the families of the attackers.³¹

The United States must maintain Treasury and State Department sanctions against individuals involved in terrorist activity, and not accede to demands to lift the sanctions merely because these individuals now hold positions of power.

The rise of Haqqani members to key positions within the interim government has caused tensions with Taliban leaders from southern Afghanistan, including Mullah Baradar, who had been the negotiating partner of former U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. Baradar was relegated to the position of deputy prime minister, despite his

critical role in securing the Doha agreement that facilitated the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. This seems to indicate that members of the Taliban who focused on the military campaign—rather than negotiations—are being credited for the victory and are thus getting a larger say in how the country is being run today. Rather than empowering the Kandahari faction of the Taliban that founded the movement in the early 1990s, the August 2021 victory has benefitted the Haqqanis, whose power base lies in eastern Afghanistan in Loya Paktia, and who have particularly close ties to Pakistani intelligence. How these internal tensions impact Taliban power dynamics and decision-making on crucial issues such as terrorism and women’s rights is still unclear, but the initial indications are concerning.

Given the continued links between Taliban leaders, especially the Haqqani faction, and terrorist groups such as al Qaeda, the United States must maintain Treasury and State Department sanctions against individuals involved in terrorist activity, and not accede to demands to lift the sanctions merely because these individuals now hold positions of power. Furthermore, it is important to keep in place U.N. Security Council terrorism sanctions.

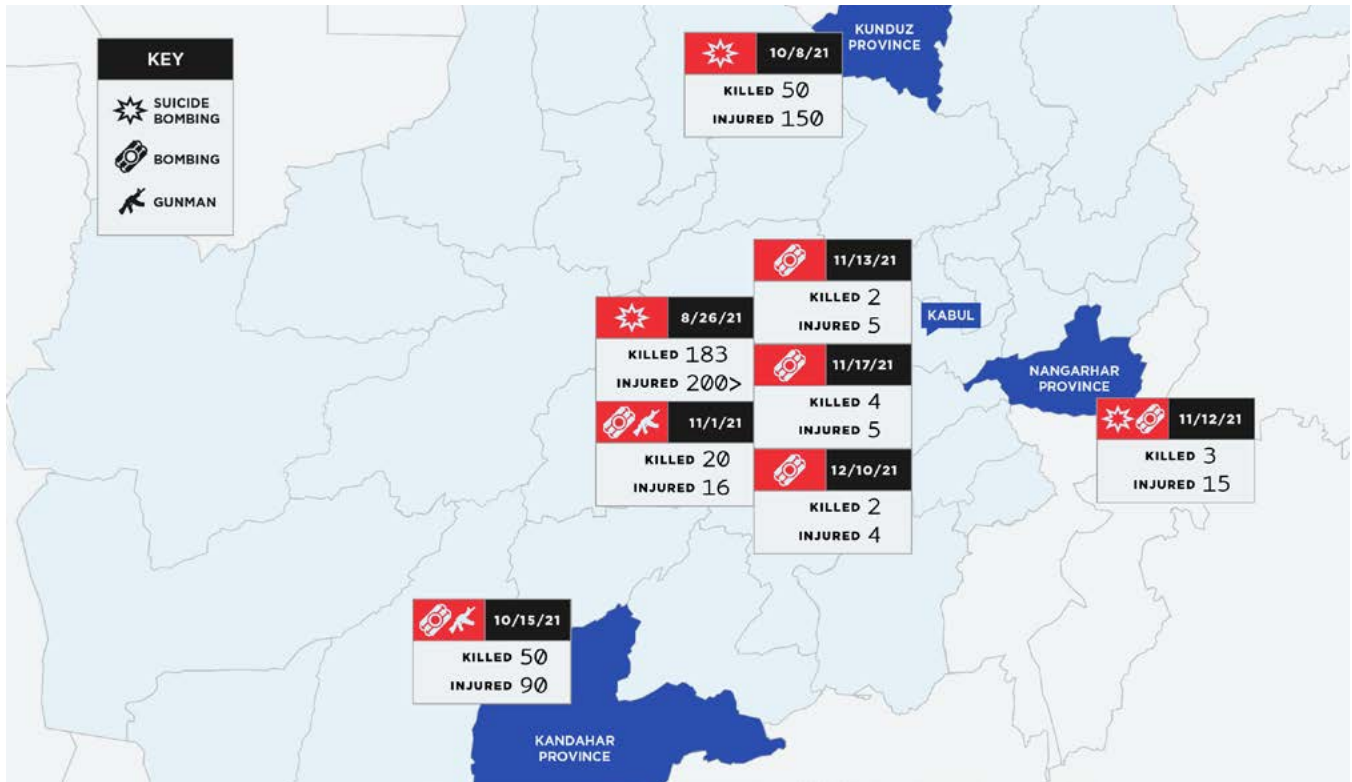
Terrorism Trends Headed in the Wrong Direction

Given the hardline composition of the interim government and the absence of any real signs that the Taliban is ready to sever links with terrorist groups, the outlook on counterterrorism trends in Afghanistan is negative. The foundation has been laid for the rebuilding of a terrorist sanctuary in the country.

Without U.S. forces on the ground in Afghanistan, intelligence collection capabilities are limited. The United States can no longer rely on local security forces to target terrorists. Through joint operations with Afghan security forces, the U.S. military had successfully addressed remaining al Qaeda elements in the country during the past several years. In the absence of a U.S. partnership with local Afghan forces, al Qaeda will have more freedom of operation, and the United States will have greater difficulty managing the threat. The Taliban will not cooperate with the United States in targeting al Qaeda and most other terrorist groups.

The increase in Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) attacks since the Taliban took power has led countries such as Pakistan to argue that the United States should support the Taliban and assist it in consolidating power to help fend off the ISIS-K threat. Since August,

CLAIMED AND SUSPECTED ISIS-K ATTACKS SINCE THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER³²



³²ISIS-K has carried out several major attacks throughout Afghanistan, including an attack on August 26 that killed 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. troops at the airport in Kabul during the evacuation process. Most other attacks have occurred at Shia mosques throughout the country or in Shia Hazara neighborhoods in Kabul. While Taliban efforts to eliminate the ISIS-K threat are welcome, the Taliban’s continued links to al Qaeda and dozens of other terrorist groups mean that a Taliban consolidation of power in Afghanistan would still facilitate the reemergence of a terrorist haven, even if ISIS-K were no longer part of the mix.

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl, in testimony before Congress in late October, acknowledged that ideally, the United States would have partners on the ground to deal with developing terrorism threats in Afghanistan. Kahl also told congressional members that ISIS-K could develop capabilities to attack the United States within six months, while al Qaeda could do so within one to two years.³³

President Biden is right that al Qaeda has metastasized during the past decade. However, the current situation in Afghanistan offers the terrorist group a unique advantage: Afghanistan is now ruled by an Islamist group that al Qaeda has fought alongside for 30 years. The two groups have also become closely linked through intermarriage. No other country in the world offers al Qaeda such luxury.

Evolving Regional Dynamics

Without troops on the ground in Afghanistan, the United States will need to rely on regional countries to help it monitor terrorist threats and achieve its counterterrorism objectives. In the past, the United States relied on Pakistan for air and ground access to Afghanistan and for staging drone attacks. Pakistan permitted these activities even though Washington and Islamabad had fundamentally different objectives in Afghanistan. Moving forward, Washington should shift its focus to building stronger counterterrorism partnerships with Central Asian states, whose leaders’ counterterrorism goals more closely match those of the United States. Russia, Iran, and China share U.S. concerns about ISIS-K, but each of these countries’ broader geopolitical differences with the United States will likely prevent any serious counterterrorism cooperation with Washington. In November, U.S. Special Representative on Afghanistan Tom West attended a meeting in Islamabad of the so-called Troika Plus, made up of the United States, Pakistan, Russia, and China. These meetings may be useful in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, but they are unlikely to help bring positive change to Taliban behavior on human rights and counterterrorism.

Pakistan

The United States must rely on Pakistani air space for over-the-horizon counterterrorism (CT) missions in Afghanistan, at least for the foreseeable future. Until it identifies a country bordering Afghanistan that would allow it to stage CT missions, the United States must launch these missions from bases in the Middle East. Even though it will be necessary to negotiate an air access agreement with Pakistan, Washington should not fall into the familiar trap of viewing the country as a CT partner, or as sharing U.S. objectives in Afghanistan, which it does not. Pakistan takes a narrow view of its strategic interests in Afghanistan, seeing them largely through the India prism. Islamabad's main objective is to prevent India from gaining a strategic foothold in the country.

The best example of Islamabad and Washington's unaligned objectives in Afghanistan is Pakistan's support for the Haqqani Network and the desire to see the Haqqanis in positions of power within the Taliban government. Islamabad trusts the Haqqanis to back their goal of preventing India from gaining influence in Afghanistan. However, the Haqqani Network is a U.S. State Department designated Foreign Terrorist Organization with close links to al Qaeda and has been involved in some of the deadliest attacks against Afghan civilians, as noted earlier.

Pakistan has never used the full force of its leverage over the Taliban to help the United States achieve its objectives in Afghanistan.

Despite intense U.S. pressure on Pakistan to crack down on the Taliban over the past 20 years, including the suspension of military assistance by the Trump administration in January 2018, Pakistan has never used the full force of its leverage over the Taliban to help the United States achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. Pakistani military and intelligence services continued to facilitate the Taliban's movement across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and they permitted the Taliban to meet, fund-raise, receive medical attention, and train on Pakistani territory. As long as the Taliban were able to fall back into Pakistan, they were never going to lose their stamina to keep fighting the Afghan government.

While the release of Mullah Baradar from a Pakistani jail was cited as an example of cooperation with U.S.-led peace talks, Baradar's relegation to Deputy Prime

Minister may now signal that Pakistani intelligence has once again manipulated Taliban power dynamics in its favor. The Pakistanis trust Baradar less than they do Haqqani Network leaders, with whom they have developed especially close ties during the past 30 years.

Russia and Iran

Russia and Iran have each strengthened their ties to the Taliban in recent years to protect their CT interests and gain a geopolitical foothold in the country. Russian and Iranian overtures to the Taliban are largely aimed at gaining Taliban cooperation against the ISIS-K threat and demonstrate a willingness to adapt policies to the evolving terrorist landscape in Afghanistan. While the amount of Afghan territory under ISIS-K control has diminished since 2018, the terrorist group remains capable of conducting large-scale attacks throughout the country and has increased the tempo of these attacks since the Taliban took power.

Russia is particularly worried about ISIS-K infiltrating into Central Asian states and gaining influence in its backyard. For its part, Iran is concerned about ISIS-K's anti-Shia agenda and its focus on attacking the Shia Hazara minority community in Afghanistan.

Moscow and Tehran's interest in countering ISIS-K has not translated into cooperation with the United States. From 2018 to 2019, during the Trump administration, the United States and Russia engaged in a counterterrorism dialogue, but the talks failed to result in substantive cooperation. At the time, Moscow was more interested in propagating a conspiracy theory, alleging that the United States was secretly supporting ISIS-K in northern Afghanistan.

Central Asia

There is room to expand U.S. CT cooperation with Central Asian nations, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, so that Washington can reduce dependence on Pakistan. While Russia (and China) would object to the United States establishing major military bases or staging lethal military equipment in its backyard, it is possible that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would agree to increasing intelligence sharing or basing small teams of U.S. special operations forces within their territory.

Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have facilitated delivery of humanitarian aid into Afghanistan and are poised to play a larger role in this area.

Uzbekistan has used Termez as a staging ground for humanitarian aid deliveries into northern Afghanistan, while Kazakhstan has allowed an air bridge to ferry U.N. staff and other humanitarian workers and aid supplies on regular flights from Almaty to Kabul. Kazakhstan has so far supplied 5,000 tons of wheat flour to ease the food crisis in Afghanistan, and the World Food Program has purchased 50,000 tons of wheat flour from Kazakhstan for distribution to Afghanistan. Kazakhstan also plans to continue its women education programs with Afghanistan and believes it can play a role in supporting women's rights.

Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have facilitated delivery of humanitarian aid into Afghanistan and are poised to play a larger role in this area.

The Uzbeks are more sanguine than other Central Asian nations about the Taliban ending cooperation with terrorists and changing their policies on human rights with the provision of international aid and infrastructure development. The Uzbek government is motivated to engage robustly with the Taliban by its desire to avoid antagonizing the extremist group; however, it has not considered the long-term impact of an agnostic approach toward the Taliban. Some Uzbeks are concerned about the potential for the Taliban victory to inspire Uzbek extremist elements, while others point to Uzbekistan's stronger economy and more stable security situation as providing shock absorbers against the rise of extremism. Uzbekistan also has been working to improve its own human rights image, including in the area of women's rights. This aspiration could provide an opening for additional cooperation with the United States and other partners.

Tajikistan has taken a much harder line toward the Taliban. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's opinion of the group is likely shaped by his 1990s experience fighting a civil war that included Islamist forces. He likely wants to guard against a resurgence of extremists in his own country.

Tajikistan has also become a refuge for the Afghan National Resistance Front (NRF), including Tajik leaders Amrullah Saleh, who served as vice president under Ghani, and Ahmad Masood, son of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masood—who was

assassinated by al Qaeda on September 9, 2001. By hosting Tajik opposition forces, President Rahmon is standing up in favor of a more ethnically balanced power structure in Afghanistan, which could help temper hardline elements within the Taliban. The challenge is that so far, neither Western countries nor Russia, China, or Iran have joined Tajikistan in its support for resistance forces. This calls into question their viability as an effective fighting force. Still, the NRF will maintain an important voice advocating for human rights and against the rise of terrorism in Afghanistan, and it deserves support from like-minded countries.

Tajikistan is increasingly relying on China for counterterrorism cooperation and to help ensure militants cannot cross into its territory from Afghanistan. Media reports say China is constructing a new military base on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan that will be maintained by Chinese paramilitary forces. The increased CT cooperation is occurring at the same time as Dushanbe is becoming more economically dependent on China. China is a major investor in Tajikistan, accounting in 2018 for 37 percent of its total foreign direct investment, and in 2020 Beijing held about a third of Dushanbe's total external debt.³⁴

China

Although China gloated over the U.S. withdrawal and hasty evacuation from the country, Beijing is concerned about Afghanistan reemerging as a global terrorist safe haven, and about the potential for Islamist extremism to spread to China's western provinces, inhabited by large Muslim populations. Beijing has historically been concerned about anti-China Islamist militants, primarily ethnic Uyghurs who have trained alongside the Taliban, and who in the past sheltered both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan's bordering tribal areas.

China has a long-term interest in seeing Afghanistan develop into a critical node in its Belt and Road Initiative, and in developing and exploiting Afghanistan's vast mineral resources. However, a Chinese consortium's \$3 billion investment in Afghanistan's Mes Aynak copper mine has laid dormant for more than a decade, and China will avoid future investments until the security situation stabilizes. In September, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid touted China as Afghanistan's most important partner, given its willingness to invest in and rebuild the country. So far, however, China has been reluctant to make financial commitments to a Taliban government that is not recognized by the rest of the world.

India

India's main concern is that the Taliban victory will inspire anti-India militants, mostly now based inside Pakistan. These groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), have been responsible for attacks inside India in recent years that have fueled Indo-Pakistani tensions and led to military crises between the two nuclear-armed nations. The most recent India-Pakistan military crisis occurred following a February 14, 2019, terrorist attack by a JeM militant that killed 40 Indian soldiers inside Indian-held Kashmir. India has also suffered major terrorist attacks on its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan at the hands of the Haqqani Network; thus, it shares U.S. concerns about the Haqqanis taking prominent roles in the newly established Taliban interim government.

India has played a helpful role in Afghanistan since the fall of Kabul, including by using its term as U.N. Security Council president in August to introduce a strong resolution calling for an inclusive government that will fight terrorism and uphold human rights, including allowing women full participation in the social, political, and economic life of the country.³⁵

India now seeks to reverse its isolation by taking a more active role in regional efforts on Afghanistan, and in early November hosted a meeting of the regional National Security Advisors in New Delhi.

India worked closely with Russia and Iran in the 1990s to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. Now that ISIS-K is their top counterterrorism priority, Russia and Iran have sought closer ties to the Taliban, and India has become more isolated on its Afghanistan policies.³⁶ India now seeks to reverse its isolation by taking a more active role in regional efforts on Afghanistan, and in early November hosted a meeting of the regional National Security Advisors in New Delhi. Pakistan and China, which do not welcome a more prominent Indian role in Afghanistan, skipped the meeting.

The United States is remaining actively involved in regional efforts on Afghanistan. Following November's Troika Plus meeting, Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and Islamabad released a joint statement that called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government, allow women and girls equal educational opportunities, and respect universally accepted human rights.³⁷

More Afghan Evacuations Needed

Since the evacuation in August, the United States has so far relocated 73,000 Afghans to the United States, where they are in the process of resettlement.³⁸ Still, tens of thousands more Afghans remain in the country who have either been approved for or are eligible for special immigrant visas (SIVs) or Priority-1 or Priority-2 status under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.³⁹ In addition, thousands of other Afghans have relocated to third countries as they wait for their U.S. visa applications to be processed.

In late October, U.S. Department of Defense official Colin Kahl testified before Congress that roughly 28,000 SIVs were in the pipeline, and that 8,555 of the applicants had departed the country with their family members before August 31, leaving an estimated 20,000 still in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Kahl reported that in principle, the Taliban was allowing SIV applicants to leave the country, but that many struggled to obtain the documentation necessary to do so. Veterans groups working to extract interpreters and other SIV-eligible Afghans have disputed that these individuals were being allowed to leave, and there is also anecdotal evidence of reprisal killings and other targeting of these individuals.

The U.S. Department of State continues to focus evacuation efforts on assisting U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents who want to leave Afghanistan. While the administration has publicly stated that it will assist other Afghan citizens in safely exiting the country, these efforts have been inconsistent, slow, and largely reliant on private efforts. It is unclear to what extent and for how long the United States will provide even minimal diplomatic support to such efforts, and whether there is a meaningful White House commitment to them.

On the other hand, there is clear bipartisan congressional support for continuing the mission to evacuate at-risk Afghans who are eligible to apply for resettlement in the United States.⁴¹ U.S. senators and members of Congress have demonstrated bipartisan support for evacuating Afghans who worked with the U.S. military and civilian agencies, including U.S.-funded nongovernmental and media organizations, and who are at risk of Taliban retaliation. Congressional members sent nearly a dozen bipartisan letters in late summer to senior Biden administration officials, calling on them to ensure the safe evacuation of Afghans who supported the U.S. mission. They have continued to raise the issue since the end of the noncombatant evacuation on August 31. On September 2, 2021, Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken requesting



On August 31, 2021, the United States completed the largest noncombatant evacuation ever conducted by the U.S. military, sending out of Afghanistan more than 123,000 civilians over an 18-day period. However, tens of thousands of at-risk Afghans eligible to apply for resettlement in the United States are still stranded in the country. (Master Sgt. Donald R. Allen/Getty Images)

a status report on 2,200 Afghans she had earlier asked the State Department to help evacuate—including SIV applicants, Priority-1 and Priority-2 designees, and women and girls whose lives were in danger.⁴²

In fact, congressional members had been pushing the administration to speed up the processing of SIVs and other evacuation-related efforts well before the Taliban took power. Unfortunately, the administration did not heed that advice, and it was not until the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, that the United States began a massive airlift to evacuate Americans, citizens of partner nations, and Afghan allies. Since the conclusion of the airlift, congressional oversight committees have struggled to get accurate and timely information about the airlift, follow-on evacuation efforts, and processes for assisting constituents. There has been broad bipartisan criticism of the political and bureaucratic responses before, during, and after the formal evacuation effort. While efforts to attach Afghanistan-related amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) have largely fallen along partisan lines, there remains a deep reservoir of unhappiness on Capitol Hill and a desire for greater accountability around both the evacuation and broader Afghanistan policy failures.

The rushed and chaotic two-week evacuation from August 16 to August 31 was disturbing for Americans

to watch, especially for soldiers who had fought in Afghanistan and for them and their families who had lost loved ones in battle. The U.S. soldiers and diplomats charged with carrying out the evacuation performed heroically, but President Biden's assertion that the evacuation was a resounding success rings hollow.⁴³

A recent survey by a private organization called More in Common, which studies the causes and solutions for America's polarized domestic politics, found that 73 percent of veterans of the Afghanistan War felt betrayed by

the way in which the United States carried out the withdrawal, and 67 percent felt humiliated by it.⁴⁴ The survey revealed that 7 in 10 veterans believed "Americans did not leave Afghanistan with honor," and that most American citizens (55 percent) and veterans (63 percent) believed the United States was morally obligated to resettle Afghan allies within U.S. borders. Indeed, 78 percent of veterans said that if they could help to resettle Afghans in the United States, this would improve their own mental health.

The Qatari government deserves U.S. appreciation for its role in assisting with evacuation efforts. As Secretary of State Blinken said in early September, "Many countries have stepped up to help the evacuation and relocation efforts in Afghanistan, but no country has done more than Qatar."⁴⁵ Qatar is temporarily housing Afghan refugees in accommodation complexes built for visitors attending this year's World Cup games. U.S. officials have acknowledged that the airlift from Kabul to Qatar would not have been possible without the support of the Qatari government. Other countries including the United Arab Emirates, Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia also have done more than their fair share and continue to temporarily house Afghan evacuees in their countries, with little to no financial support from Washington.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

President Biden may want to close the book on Afghanistan and shift the U.S. focus to other parts of the world, but even if this were possible, it would be a mistake for Washington to disengage. The United States still has significant national security interests in the country, namely preventing the resurgence of terrorism. It also is in the United States' interest to continue to work with like-minded partners to avoid humanitarian catastrophes and preserve the civil society gains. This will demonstrate U.S. global leadership on human rights, and it will enable holding at least some of the gains made from Washington's tremendous expenditure of blood and treasure during the past 20 years. Finally, the United States has a moral obligation to evacuate and resettle Afghans who worked with the U.S. government and who are now in danger because of that work, and to continue assisting those who remain to fight for human rights in Afghanistan.

To avoid humanitarian catastrophes and the collapse of the Afghan economy, the United States should:

Encourage the World Bank to set up an Afghan Relief Trust Fund to funnel money into the economy, especially salaries for civil servants.

This trust fund should operate along the same lines as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which operated from 2002 until the collapse of Kabul on

August 15, 2021. The funding would bypass ministries controlled by the Taliban government and go directly to humanitarian organizations or to pay the salaries of civil servants, especially those working in the education and health care sectors. There is reportedly \$1.1 billion still left in the reconstruction fund that could be applied immediately to national programs under the new relief trust fund. One advantage to relying on the World Bank to administer it would be that the systems for distributing and monitoring the assistance are already in place. Thus, the international community could avoid starting from scratch. While the U.N. is currently playing a role in distributing salaries in the health care sector, this should only be a temporary arrangement. The U.N.'s track record for distributing large amounts of cash effectively and efficiently is lacking.

Work with international partners to explore the possibility of establishing a financial corridor via a private Afghan bank.

The United States should cooperate with international partners and financial institutions to explore whether an Afghan private bank could adopt some functions that normally are performed by a government-run central bank. This solution, which has been discussed by CNAS Adjunct Senior Fellow Alex Zerden, could potentially enable international donors to help pay the salaries of civil servants. Since any Afghan-owned entity will be susceptible to Taliban pressure, however, the United States and its international partners would have to put in place mechanisms that deal with this challenge.



A recent survey by the international nonprofit organization More in Common found that most U.S. veterans believe the United States is morally obligated to resettle Afghan allies within its borders, and helping with resettlement efforts would improve their own mental health. (Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

Rely on Central Asian states to funnel humanitarian aid into the country.

Washington should look to Termez in Uzbekistan and Almaty in Kazakhstan as key humanitarian access points into Afghanistan. The United States and other donors should work closely with U.N. agencies, Bretton Woods Institutions, and the Kazak and Uzbek governments to ensure that humanitarian corridors are established in ways that benefit host communities, do not encourage trafficking or other illicit activities, and are targeted to the most vulnerable beneficiaries.

Regarding engagement with the Taliban, the United States should:

Refuse to recognize the Taliban government as long as U.S.-designated individuals remain part of the cabinet.

As long as Haqqani leaders remain in key positions within the Taliban interim government, Washington must not consider diplomatic recognition of that regime. Recognizing a government that includes designated terrorists with U.S. blood on their hands would provide a boost to terrorists throughout the region and increase danger to U.S. citizens worldwide.

Form a contact group with like-minded countries to determine an engagement strategy with the Taliban and put forward a road map for influencing Taliban policies on human rights and terrorism.

The United States and like-minded partners should develop a plan for influencing Taliban behavior on human rights and counterterrorism. The roadmap for engagement should require concrete actions, not only verbal commitments, that generate reciprocal rewards such as technical assistance and other forms of non-humanitarian aid. It is critical that U.S. funding not end up lining the pockets of terrorists who are still intent on attacking the United States. At the very least, benchmarks should include the Taliban providing amnesty to all former government employees; forming an inclusive government; allowing a humanitarian corridor for assistance to be delivered directly to the Afghan people; supporting secondary schooling for girls nationwide and equal access for women to attend university; and permitting women to work in all sectors of the economy.

Make future U.S. development funding to the Taliban government conditional on respect for human rights, especially those of women.

The United States must make conditional any funding for the Afghan education sector on women being allowed to teach, girls being allowed to attend secondary school, and women being allowed to attend university classes, including those attended or taught by males. Donor countries should make clear that limits on women's rights and participation in society, education, and the economy will impact the Taliban's ability to access funding from international financial institutions.

Maintain State and Treasury Department sanctions on Haqqani Network and Taliban leaders until they completely sever ties to terrorism.

The United States should not accede to Taliban demands to lift sanctions on their leaders on the basis that these individuals have been granted positions of power. The Taliban and Haqqani Network should retain their classifications as Specially Designated Global Terrorist groups under Executive Order 13224, and the Haqqani Network should maintain its designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act until Washington can verify the groups have completely severed ties to terrorism. The CIA should do a thorough analysis on the precise nature of the Taliban and Haqqani Network's relationship to al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The National Security Council should then lead an interagency policy process to determine criteria by which the U.S. government will determine whether the groups have broken ties with terrorism.

To preserve human rights, especially those of women, the United States should:

Strengthen the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) mandate to work directly with civil society.

Washington should encourage the U.N. to partner closely with Afghan civil society and to engage with actors across the political spectrum, rather than focus primarily on the Taliban. The goal with this engagement is to keep civic and political spaces open. The United States also needs to make it clear to all U.N. agencies that they must assert and protect the full rights of their female employees, including insisting on their participation in negotiations with the Taliban and their ability to conduct their work without interference or threat.

Set up an independent human rights monitoring mechanism.

A credible and objective human rights monitoring and reporting mechanism, together with appropriate accountability tools, will help prevent the kinds of serious abuses that were committed during the Taliban's previous time in power. Whether mandated by the U.N. General Assembly or the Human Rights Council, it is critical that the mechanism have a mandate to perform gender and social inclusion analyses to inform international aid decisions, and that it be empowered with an action plan for engagement with the Taliban.

Maintain strong language on human rights in UNSC and U.N. General Assembly resolutions.

Washington must work closely with Paris and London to prevent Moscow and Beijing from diluting language on human rights in UNSC resolutions related to Afghanistan, or from removing human rights protection mechanisms from the UNAMA mandate.

Engage closely with the Afghan diaspora.

The United States should remain closely engaged with the Afghan diaspora to monitor the humanitarian and human rights situation inside Afghanistan. Diaspora remittances also present a potentially valuable resource for humanitarian assistance, and governments should be mindful of how they can facilitate these flows in ways that are both legal and efficient.

On the diplomatic and political front, the United States should:

Engage with Central Asian countries about Afghanistan's future and encourage them to qualify their engagement with the Taliban.

U.S. diplomats should make clear to Central Asian nations that the future direction of governance in Afghanistan has implications for trends in Islamist extremism in their own countries. While some Central Asian leaders may believe tacit support for the Taliban offers the best chance for bringing stability in neighboring Afghanistan, they must also consider the impact of empowering hardliners on Islamist trends in their own countries.

To deal with the threat of terrorism, the United States should:

Invest in enhancing drone technology for over-the-horizon CT operations.

The U.S. military should be prepared to conduct drone operations from bases in the Middle East for the foreseeable future, because Pakistan and the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan are wary of the United States basing lethal operations from their territories.

Increase CT cooperation with Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

There are opportunities to increase intelligence sharing, CT training, and other joint CT activities with the Central Asian states. Over the longer term, it is possible that Central Asian states might allow the United States to base intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets in their territories, or even allow limited special operations forces operations to be launched from the region. The military and intelligence leadership in some of the Central Asian countries tends to be skeptical of the Taliban, because of concern about the group's continued links to terrorism and what that means for the region more broadly. In the event the Central Asian states become more open to U.S. CT activities being launched from their territories, the United States should be prepared to disburse CT assets throughout the region that could operate in concert to address threats while reducing reliance on a single basing option.

Regarding evacuations, the United States should:

Strengthen the State Department's capabilities and accountability for maintaining an effort to evacuate at-risk Afghans eligible to apply for resettlement in the United States.

The State Department must do more to assist these individuals in departing the country by using all available authorities and resources to simplify the existing processes that currently make it difficult—if not impossible—for identified and verified at-risk Afghans to leave the country. As part of this effort, the U.S. State Department must ensure that any further evacuation efforts target the needs of at-risk Afghan women, who were severely disadvantaged during the August

evacuation operation. State should also work more closely with friendly countries that retain embassies in Afghanistan, including Qatar, Uzbekistan, and others that can facilitate safe passage to the airport. Additionally, the State Department should help these Afghans identify third country destinations where they can reside temporarily, with adequate humanitarian support and/or access to work, school, and other services, while the U.S. government processes their resettlement applications. The National Security Council should work with the Departments of State, Homeland Security, Defense, and Justice to strengthen interagency coordination and ensure that agencies are using all available authorities and resources to expedite and streamline the current processes.

Work more closely with private entities seeking to safely extract Afghans in danger.

The State Department should establish a more inclusive, better resourced, and more transparent process for working with private organizations assisting Afghan evacuation efforts. To date, the State Department has failed to establish an effective working partnership with the dozens of independent groups run by U.S. veterans who served in Afghanistan, faith-based communities, and others volunteer organizations that are willing and able to assist America's Afghan allies. State should establish meaningful and well-resourced public-private partnerships that can take advantage of the flexibility and innovation of the private efforts while providing the necessary diplomatic, legal, and other guidance to facilitate effective operations. State could also take advantage of existing public-private partnerships, such as the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, to streamline referrals and other coordinating tasks.

To avoid mistakes made in Afghanistan in future U.S. foreign policy decisions, the U.S. Congress should:

Fully empower the Afghanistan Commission mandated in the 2022 NDAA and ensure it is handled in a nonpartisan manner.

While the Biden administration mismanaged the U.S. withdrawal, the overall failure of the Afghanistan mission is a result of years of mistakes by both Republican and Democratic administrations. The commission must examine the handling of the troop withdrawal and evacuation process in the summer of 2021, including why the withdrawal was so rushed, involving the abrupt departure of tens of thousands of contractors, and why the process

was so chaotic and disorganized. The American public, especially veterans and families who have lost loved ones in the war, were disturbed by the way the evacuation was handled, and they want explanations for why and how the Biden administration made its decisions.

However, the commission must examine all aspects of the Afghan mission during the past 20 years—not just the last six months. Another important issue for the commission to explore is why the Trump administration forced President Ghani to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, including terrorists who had killed U.S., UK, French, and Australian soldiers, even though it was clear the Taliban was not interested in a negotiated settlement.

The commission should address how the United States employed all tools at its disposal to meet its objectives, and it must probe the functioning of the interagency, i.e., how the mission was coordinated among the different U.S. government agencies. Finally, it should put forward recommendations for improving government processes and accountability mechanisms to avoid similar foreign policy failures in the future. If congressional leaders try to use the Afghanistan issue only to batter their political opponents, all Americans will lose, because national leaders will fail to learn from past mistakes and will make similar foreign policy blunders in the future.

Conclusion

President Biden's abrupt troop withdrawal from Afghanistan this summer was based on a faulty U.S. agreement with the Taliban that was negotiated by the Trump administration. The result is that the country may now reemerge as a terrorist hotbed that could once again pose a serious threat to American citizens. The rise of the al Qaeda-linked Haqqani Network within the Taliban's interim government is of particular concern. Backsliding on human rights, especially those of women and girls, also is a serious danger. It is imperative that the United States work with like-minded partners to protect Afghan civil society and ensure the Taliban refrain from the kind of egregious human rights abuses they committed during their previous time in power.

The United States cannot simply wash its hands of Afghanistan—ignoring the looming humanitarian catastrophe or wishing away the terrorist threat that is likely to grow in the coming months and years. The United States ignored Afghanistan after the Soviets departed in 1989, and the result was the 9/11 attacks. Moving forward, the United States must base its engagement in Afghanistan on the principles of freedom and human dignity, with eyes wide open to the continuing global terrorist threats that emanate from the country.

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